Research Paper

Critical Understanding of Adolf Hitler from a Social Psychological Perspective with Regards to Genocide

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The question that this article poses—*What can social psychology tell us about the Holocaust?*—is a difficult and complex one to answer. Perhaps it is fair to begin by saying that the Holocaust has influenced our understanding of social psychology more than the other way around. Early work in the field was directly motivated by the devastation and tragedies that took place between 1933-1945 (e.g., on the Holocaust, see Hilberg, 1973; on Jewish persecution from 1933-39, see Friedländer, 1997; on the Third Reich, see Shirer, 1998). Central topics in social psychology such as attribution, social influence, and intergroup processes all have their roots in the works of thinkers who had the events of the 1930s and 40s seared in their minds, many of whom had to flee their homelands to escape the specter of Nazism.

In the 1960s and early 70s, seminal work in the field, such as Milgram's (1974) research on obedience to authority and the Stanford Prison experiment by Zimbardo and his colleagues (Zimbardo, Banks, Haney, & Jaffe, 1973), continued to be motivated by a need to understand the perpetrators of the Holocaust and other acts of collective violence. To this day, these studies represent social psychology's most salient demonstrations of *situationism*—a core tenet of the field that emphasizes the power of the situational forces over human behavior (see Ross & Nisbett, 1991). This research, along with Arendt's (1965) insightful report on the trial of Adolf Eichmann, also provided the basis for the "banality of evil" perspective which rejects the notion that evil acts are the result of "sadistic monsters" and which emphasizes that evildoers are usually ordinary people who find themselves in extraordinary circumstances (e.g., Zimbardo, 1995; for recent critiques of the banality of evil perspective, see Berkowitz, 1999; Mandel, 1998).

From the end of the Second World War to the present day, we have seen the types of social problems and historic tragedies that have motivated much of social psychology's most socially relevant research continue to reappear. Examples of war, genocide, and democide—"the murder of any person or people by a government" (Rummel, 1994, p. 3)—are commonplace. As Global Action International Network (1999) reported, "According to some estimates, up to 35 million people—90 percent civilians—have been killed in 170 wars since the end of World War II." It is because of this stark reality that we must address the question that this volume poses, with a view to addressing the more general question: What can social psychology tell us about the origins of, and possible solutions to, the many forms of collective violence that plague us today?

Instigators: The Fourth Leg of Collective Violence

Psychological research and theory geared towards understanding collective violence— sometimes termed "the psychology of evil" (e.g. Baumeister, 1997; Darley, 1992; Miller, 1999; Staub, 1989)—has tended to focus on three groups: victims, perpetrators, and bystanders (e.g., Hilberg, 1995; Staub, 1989). In this chapter, I have proposed that the second category—

perpetrators—needs to be refined or perhaps divided. Specifically, those who instigate collective violence need to be distinguished from those who subsequently carry it out. We may call the former *instigators* and the latter *perpetrators*. The main point is that the instigator is critical for the *origination* of an act of collective violence, whereas the perpetrator—usually one of many— is critical for its *execution*.

In the first few sections of this paper, I have discussed some of the ways in which instigators differ from perpetrators, and I have tried to articulate why a psychology of instigation is important and doable and also why it has largely been ignored. In the latter part of this paper, I have examined the most notorious genocidal and democidal instigator of the 20th century, Adolf Hitler, from a social psychological perspective. So many have attempted to explain Hitler (for a recent overview, see Rosenbaum, 1998) and scores of books have been written about him, including some notable biographies (e.g., Bullock, 1990; Kershaw, 1998). The present discussion is certainly not a comprehensive account of either Hitler's psychological makeup or of how and why he became the instigator of a series of democides that claimed the lives of close to 21 million innocent victims (Rummel, 1992) . Rather, the aim here was to show that *even Hitler* can be examined in terms of the same social psychological principles used to describe and explain ordinary individuals. In so doing, the chapter offers a situationist message—that instigators, much like their followers, are people who have been molded by the interplay of powerful situational forces and basic psychological needs.

Toward a Psychology of Instigators

Why Study Them?

Given that it is the goals, plans, and acts of instigators that set in motion a complex, causal chain of events leading to collective violence, the pragmatic importance of understanding what we can of the psychology of instigators should be evident. Nevertheless, the significance of examining instigators has sometimes been downplayed in favor of understanding how ordinary members of society can be led to participate in acts of collective violence. For example, at the end of a chapter on Hitler, Staub (1989) wrote, "there will always be wild ideas and extreme ideologies. For us the question is how the German people came to follow a leader and a party with such ideas, and how they came to participate in their fulfillment" (p. 98).

One reason for this focus is social psychology's aim of formulating accounts that generalize to the mass of ordinary people (Suedfeld, 2000). Instigators of genocide, with their "wild ideas" do not seem to fit this mold. Thus, some theorists share the view that although instigators, like Hitler, are important causal factors, they are nevertheless inexplicable in terms of the psychological processes that are used to describe normal or ordinary individuals. Consider Milgram (1974): "The psychological adjustments of a Wehrmacht General to Adolf Hitler parallel those of the lowest infantryman to his superior, and so forth, throughout the system. *Only the psychology of the ultimate leader demands a different set of explanatory principles* (p. 130, italics mine).

Another reason for reluctance may be the concern that people will misconstrue explanations as exculpations and condonations. In fact, recent research has shown that explaining a perpetrator's behavior can increase the likelihood of condoning that behavior (Miller, Gordon, & Buddie, 1999), and, as I have argued elsewhere (see Mandel, 1998), the social dangers of such accounts need to be carefully considered. There are also some attributional reasons why the psychological study of instigators has received little attention. For instance, perpetrators greatly outnumber instigators and may seem more important to understand. Also, perpetrators tend to commit the actual killings, and because murder is a salient, abnormal act it is especially likely to prompt the question *Why?* (Kahneman & Miller, 1986). However, it is precisely because instigators can lead other people to participate in murder that we need to try to understand them as well as their followers.

Instigators and Perpetrators

The distinction between instigators and perpetrators shares some similarities to that between leaders and followers but the two distinctions are not synonymous. Leaders and followers represent a much broader social grouping. Many high-ranking Nazis were leaders but their roles in the ontogenesis of the Holocaust were nevertheless as perpetrators, not instigators. For instance, although Heinrich Himmler and Reinhardt Heydrich, each in their own ways, were architects of the Final Solution of the European Jewish Question[1] (Breitman, 1991), it was Hitler who "commissioned" the plan to annihilate the Jews in the first place (on the timing of the order, see Cesarani, 1994).

Like instigators, perpetrators may include people other than those who directly carry out the killing or torturing of victims. Rather, perpetrators are those people who take deliberate actions that contribute to the social production of collective violence and who do so with an understanding that their actions will contribute to

such ends. Central planners of genocide, like Himmler, Heydrich, and their underlings like Eichmann, are obvious examples. However, the industrialists who knowingly built crematoria for the burning of corpses that resulted from Nazi atrocities also are perpetrators. Indeed, the division of labor amongst the perpetrators of the Holocaust represented a microcosm of modern society complete with its bureaucrats, businessmen, lawyers, doctors, scientists, writers and commentators, police and military, each of whom contributed to the production of genocide.

Instigators as Catalysts of Collective Violence

One might describe Hitler as a necessary cause of the Holocaust, and the counterfactual logic is clear: If no Hitler, then no Holocaust (Himmelfarb, 1984). Still, this label fails to convey the fact that Hitler was the person most *responsible* for instigating that catastrophe. Or, as Yehuda Bauer put it, Hitler was "the radicalizing factor" (1994, p. 308). Bauer's statement is indicative of an important point about instigators. It is characteristic of instigators, but not perpetrators, that they serve a *catalytic* role in the development of collective violence.

Instigators offer hope to their followers, usually in times of social crisis in which many are searching for meaning and a sense of belonging in their lives. This hope is energizing and provides a common vision, but it is often a vision that rests on hatred and distrust, and that relies on scapegoating and violence. Hitler capitalized on Germany's high propensity for violence during a period of dramatic social unrest and consolidated immense power in the process. In exchange, he imparted a new form of coherence to an unstable social system, albeit one that

[1] *Endlösung der europäischen Judenfrage* was how the Nazis labeled the murder of all Jews within their jurisdiction from the invasion of the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 until the defeat of Third Reich.

culminated in incalculable misery and destruction and that proved to also be unstable. In so doing, his role was figural against a background of other enabling conditions and transformed those conditions.

The catalytic function served by instigators does not, however, mean that they are initial causes of collective violence. Rather, they dramatically increase the propensity for violence and they act to accelerate its pace once it has started. For instance, the racial anti-semitism propagated by the Nazis under Hitler had as one of its own proximal causes the antisemitic German writings of the late 1800s. Consider a few examples: In 1873, Wilhelm Marr published *The Victory of Jewry over Germandom, considered from a non-denominational point of view*. In 1878, Paul Bötticher (under the pseudonym of Paul de Lagarde) published *German Writings*, in which he prophesied a mortal struggle between the Jews and the Germans and called for the extermination of "these bacilli." In 1881, Eugen Dühring, a lecturer in economics and philosophy, published *The Jewish Question as a Question of Race, Morals and Civilization*. In 1899, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, an Englishman by birth but German by choice, published *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century*, a book that, as Cohn (1996) pointed out, "became the Bible of the *völkisch*-racist movement" (p. 190). And, in 1905, Alfred Plötz (1860-1940) founded The German Society for Racial Hygiene which "was dedicated to the creation of optimal conditions for the maintenance and development of the German 'race' in competition with other peoples" (Stackelberg, 1999, p. 52).

If Hitler had not been exposed to the ideas and acts expressed by these and other anti-semitic ultra-nationalists as a teenager and young adult, it is almost certain that he would not have turned out to be the world's most notorious democidal instigator. But Hitler was exposed to them and, significantly, he was more effective than any of his contemporaries at bringing anti-semitic *völkisch* nationalism to the general public and eventually creating a *mortacracy*—"a type of political system that habitually and systematically murders large numbers of its own citizens" (Rummel, 1994, p. 3)—based on that ideology.

The Non-interchangeability of Instigators

In his recent biography of Hitler, Kershaw noted that "whatever the external circumstances and impersonal determinants, Hitler was not interchangeable" (1998, p. xxvii). Kershaw's statement, like Bauer's, is indicative of another important difference between perpetrators and instigators: unlike the former, the latter exhibit *non-interchangeability*. That is, instigators, particularly the most notorious ones like Hitler, seem to be characterized by a sense of singularity that is generally lacking from even their most repugnant bureaucrats and henchmen, from the Himmlers and Hösses who plan and implement democide.

The noninterchangeability of instigators is impossible to demonstrate unequivocally and may in some cases be more apparent than real. In hindsight, it is difficult to imagine how the Holocaust would have happened

as it did without Hitler but we can never know with certainty what would have happened instead if Hitler had not existed. More generally, the counterfactual simulations (see Kahneman & Tversky, 1982) of theorists who attempt to account for acts of collective violence may give rise to perceptions of non-interchangeability. Nevertheless, those perceptions may be legitimately based on an analysis of the disproportionate influence that instigators exert on an emerging system of collective violence. In totalitarian regimes, such as the Third Reich, it is evident that such influence is real.

In his analysis of power in contemporary societies, Toffler (1990; cf. Russell, 1992) defined three forms: *low-grade* power relies on physical force or the threat of violence, *medium-grade* power relies on control of capital wealth, and *high-grade* power relies on access to, and control of, information and knowledge. A critical factor that clearly distinguishes instigators from other perpetrators is the acquisition of power across this power spectrum. Instigators are likely to achieve higher positions of authority than perpetrators (often dictatorial status). Moreover, the roles that even high-ranking perpetrators take on are often shaped and sanctioned by ultimate leaders (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). This was certainly true of Hitler's totalitarian mortacracy. Unlike most perpetrators, instigators may attain the power to mobilize armies, paramilitary forces, and the police. They can direct capital spending and can change laws. They can influence the attitudes of the masses via propaganda and media control, and they can influence mass behavior more directly through enticements and fear tactics.

For instance, a subtle psychological tactic that may be employed by instigators is to induce *false consensus effects* (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977). False consensus typically refers to situations in which people falsely believe that their attitudes or beliefs are shared by a majority of other people. This definition implies an egocentric focus: Namely, people believe that other people think like *they* do. However, a more general definition of the false consensus effect would be simply to subscribe to a false belief about consensus. Media-controlling instigators may propagate mass false consensus effects by suggesting that the nation (or a large majority of its constituency) subscribes to beliefs and endorses policies that in fact are not widely shared. Thus, the leaders of countries at war will try to instill not only the belief that "the war is necessary," but also the belief that "most citizens agree that the war is necessary." Such consensus beliefs provide social justifications for moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999), thus serving as precursors to collective violence and facilitating the transition of the eventual perpetrators (Staub, 1990).

With power over the media, instigators can also manipulate the perceived credibility of individuals and groups that they view as friends or adversaries. It is well-known that Nazi propaganda portrayed Jews as corrupt liars who, because of their ostensibly malign genetic heritage, could do nothing else but threaten the integrity of the German people and their way of life. The belief in the unchangeable nature of "the Jew" allowed Germans to morally justify even such heinous acts as killing Jewish babies. Moreover, derogatory messages about Jews were frequently reiterated to the public, and we know from psychological research that the mere reiteration of a message increases the likelihood that it will be believed—a finding known as the *reiteration effect* (Hertwig, Gigerenzer, & Hoffrage, 1997). In short, instigators not only have the power to authorize individuals to participate directly in collective violence, they also have the power to shape bystanders' reactions to these events.

The power of instigators ultimately extends to the victims themselves. According to Fiske and her colleagues, power may be defined as "the disproportionate ability for some people or groups to control others' outcomes" (Goodwin, Operario, & Fiske, 1998, p. 679; see also Fiske, 1993)— an ability they term *fate control*. The power that instigators exercise over their victims is the starkest reminder of fate control. They can strip victims of their human and legal rights, destroy their cultural institutions, instill fear and terror in them, and loot their possessions—even their corpses after they have been tortured and murdered (Strzelecki, 1994).

Instigators also exercise the ability to stigmatize their victims. Goffman (1990) defined *stigma* as "the situation of the individual who is disqualified from full social acceptance" (p. 9). Victims of collective violence may be stigmatized in many ways: through escalations in violence levied against them; through repressive laws that curtail their personal, religious, and economic freedoms, that increase their social burdens, and that identify them as menaces or pariahs of society; through propaganda that depersonalizes and dehumanizes them and ascribes to them a host of negative attributes; and through enticements granted to those who take it upon themselves to worsen the victim's situation.

For instance, the decree on 1 September 1941 that Jews must wear the star of David on their clothing served to stigmatize Jews by visibly, and legally, setting them apart from the rest of society. The decree was an example of state-organized moral exclusion. The message was clear: Those people are Jews, not Germans, and not people to whom "real Germans" have moral obligations. Significantly, the decree also signaled the start of the planned deportation of the Jews to the death camps (Friedlander, 1995). More generally, once a group is

morally excluded from a society, it becomes much easier for others to act violently against them, to knowingly benefit from their exploitation, or to stand by without feeling empathy upon witnessing their destruction (Staub, 1990).

Instigators as Propagators of Nationalism

As LeBon (1896) emphasized over a century ago, the effective instigator energizes his followers by agitating their emotions and by appealing to the sentiments that guide their reason. In modern history, *nationalism* has been one of the most effective political strategies for accomplishing this goal (Berlin, 1991; Hobsbawn, 1992; Smith, 1986), and its success is fundamentally due to its psychological power. On one hand, nationalism creates an egotistic sense of in-group cohesion by emphasizing the shared greatness of a people. On the other hand, it exacerbates feelings of threat by pointing to the nation's precariousness, feelings of hatred by pointing to those deemed responsible for its hardships and failures, and feelings of insult due to the belief that one's nation has not received the respect it deserves. As Isaiah Berlin (1991) noted long ago, nationalism is often motivated by some form of collective humiliation (see also Staub, 1989). Chirot (1994) has documented that, in case after case, 20th-century tyrannies have been characterized by a combination of perceived national superiority coupled with perceived national threat and/or a collective sense of insult from the outside world. The Nazi image of a German master race threatened by an international Jewish plague that mocked Germany and her people illustrates the point.

Nationalism plays upon a fundamental aspect of human social cognition; namely, the tendency to categorize individuals into groups. Indeed, it has been shown that people will discriminate in favor of ingroup members and against outgroup members even when the basis of social categorization is trivial (Tajfel, 1981). Nationalism is particularly effective at creating this sense of *us* versus *them* because nations (unlike states) tend to be defined in terms of features that are of high personal and social importance, such as ethnicity, race, religion, ideology, and language (Azzi, 1998). Consequently, the nation may be perceived, and may in fact behave, not merely as an aggregate but as a cohesive *entity* (Campbell, 1958). For example, German *völkisch* nationalists conceived of their nation as an organic whole whose members were united by blood bonds that went back to the beginning of human history (Stackelberg, 1999).

Hitler, with his charisma as an orator, was able to use nationalist messages to effectively build support for his leadership. Once in power, he used racist nationalistic rhetoric to justify the discriminatory policies that he introduced and, later, the democides that he instigated. As I discuss next, however, Hitler's affinity for nationalism and violence went far beyond any calculated strategy and had much to do with his own threatened sense of greatness.

Normalizing Hitler

Threatened Egotism

According to Baumeister, Smart, and Boden (1996), *egotism* refers "both to favorable appraisals of self and to the motivated preference for such favorable appraisals, regardless of whether they are valid or inflated" (p. 6). These authors have reviewed considerable literature indicating that violence is more likely to be carried out by people with high but unstable self esteem than by people with either high and stable self esteem or low self esteem. Their account posits that when people with inflated but uncertain self esteem encounter negative evaluations from others they experience a salient ego threat. The threatened egotist may respond by accepting negative feedback and lowering his self-appraisal, or he may reject such feedback and maintain his self-appraisal. In both cases, negative emotions are likely to ensue. However, in the former case they are likely to be self-directed feelings of dejection, whereas in the latter case they are likely to be directed toward the source of ego threat and may provoke aggression or violence against that source.

Baumeister et al.'s (1996) account is eminently applicable to Hitler. Biographies of Hitler (e.g., Bullock, 1962; Kershaw, 1998) reveal time and again that (a) he had an highly inflated sense of self worth, (b) he received feedback that contradicted his hubristic self image, (c) he could not accept those negative self appraisals, and (d) he responded emotionally directing his negative feelings at those he blamed for his failures. Consider one example from his teenage years. At eighteen, Hitler left home for Vienna. He was certain that he possessed the artistic ability to enter the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna and become a great artist, but he was not admitted.

Reflecting on his disconfirmed expectancy, Hitler later wrote in *Mein Kampf* "I was so convinced that I would be successful that when I received my rejection, it struck me as a bolt from the blue" (1992, p. 18).

Moreover, at the same time, Hitler's only friend and roommate, August Kubizek, was accepted to the Vienna Conservatoire to pursue his musical ambitions, thus providing Hitler with a constant upward social comparison.

That Hitler could not accept the negative appraisal was revealed by the fact that for some time he lied to Kubizek about his rejection from the Academy. As Kershaw noted,

For a teenager to fail to pass an extremely tough entrance examination is in itself neither unusual nor shameful. But Adolf could evidently not bear to tell his friend, to whom he had always claimed to be so superior in all matters of artistic judgement, and whose own studies at the Conservatoire had started so promisingly, of his rejection. The blow to his self esteem had been profound. And the bitterness showed. According to Kubizek, he would fly off the handle at the slightest thing. His loss of self confidence could flare up in an instant into boundless anger and violent denunciation of all who he thought were persecuting him. (1998, p. 39)

The preceding description provides a good example in support of Baumeister et al.'s (1996) proposition that "because the angry, hostile response is essentially a means of preventing oneself from having to suffer through a depressing revision of self-appraisal, its function is largely anticipatory. Hence, highly sensitive individuals may react with considerable hostility to seemingly minor ego threats" (p. 11). In short, Hitler was prototypic of exactly the kind of threatened egotist and aggressor that Baumeister et al. (1996) have described.

It is important to note, however, that the threatened egotism which Hitler displayed is not a sign of abnormality; nor is it inexplicable in psychological terms. Indeed, considerable research indicates that ordinary individuals are highly resistant to lowering their self appraisals in light of negative feedback (e.g., Greenwald, 1980; Swann, 1987). Of course, it is true that Hitler threatened egotism was extreme. The magnitude of his emotional and behavioral reactions were certainly uncommon. However, there is little to suggest that the underlying psychological processes are somehow fundamentally different from those used to explain the behavior of less notorious figures or even the common man on the street.

As noted earlier, nationalism tends to embody threatened egotism within a collective ideology, and it is no surprise that Hitler gravitated toward nationalism (although his rise to power was certainly unpredictable). Hitler's nationalist identity was very much the result of his need to establish a positive social identity in light of the repeated personal failures and disconfirmed expectations that he had experienced as a teenager and young adult (see Kershaw, 1998). Because he could neither plausibly protect his high self esteem with personal examples of success nor accept his failures, he bolstered his egotistic sense of self by identifying with what he conceived of as a strong and great nation. When Germany entered into the First World War, Hitler was euphoric. Self-affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) predicts that when people receive negative feedback in one domain they often respond by asserting themselves in another domain. The war provided Hitler with a chance to affirm his positive self identity in a domain in which he had no track record of failure. Indeed, Hitler was fanatical about his duties as a soldier and was certain that Germany would win the war (Kershaw, 1998).

When Germany lost the war, Hitler's positive self image was easily destabilized. Indeed, he reacted to the news "of the greatest villainy of the century" (Hitler, 1992, p. 183) with extreme negative emotions. His description in *Mein Kampf* of his reaction indicates his sense of *shock*— "Again everything went black before my eyes; I tottered and groped my way back to the dormitory, threw myself on my bunk, and dug my burning head into my blanket and pillow" (p. 185); *misery*—"Since the day when I stood at my mother's grave, I had not wept . . . But now I could not help it . . ." (pp. 185-186); *despair* and *hopelessness*—"There followed terrible days and even worse nights—I knew that all was lost . . ." (p. 187); and ultimately *hatred*—"In these nights hatred grew in me, hatred for those responsible for this deed" (p. 187).

Self-Serving Attribution and Motivated Reasoning

Like so many other disillusioned nationalists, who had exhibited euphoric overconfidence in 1914 and were totally unprepared for the brutal disconfirmation of 1918, Hitler desired an external causal attribution for Germany's defeat, one that would quell his own renewed sense of personal failure, frustration, and futility, as well as repair his damaged social identity. Already by the middle of the war, the hard times that Germans faced resulted in a radicalization and olarization of the political scene. *Völkisch* antisemitism was on the rise in Germany, fomented by the nationalist right who accused Jews of war profiteering, evading military service, and, outlandishly, of secretly arranging for Germany's defeat. In short, Jews had "stabbed Germany in the back." In reality, Jews were a salient scapegoat. Germans and Austrians had long been primed with images of the Jewish threat and, given the social context, it took no great leap of imagination to make the connection between Jewish conspiracy and the loss of the war.

Hitler's attributional account of Germany's failure is illustrative of the same *self-serving bias* (Miller & Ross, 1975) common among ordinary individuals—namely, the tendency for people to attribute their successes to their own or their ingroup's behaviors or characteristics (internal attributions) but to attribute their failures to factors located outside of themselves or their ingroup (external attributions). The self-serving bias may occur partly because people *expect* to succeed and tend to attribute expected outcomes to internal factors such as their efforts and abilities (Ross, 1977). Just as Hitler had no doubt that he would be admitted to the Academy, he was convinced at the outset that Germany would win the First World War.

The self-serving bias may also occur due to directional motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990) geared toward protecting one's self-esteem (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1982). By directional motivated reasoning, I mean reasoning that is carried out with the goal of supporting a particular conclusion that an individual *wants* to believe in. Hitler wanted to believe that Germany had been deceived because he could not accept that it would have lost the war any other way. The Jewish conspiracy account allowed Hitler to deflect blame away from Germany, Germans, and himself personally and redirect it toward *the Jew*: As he stated in *Mein Kampf*, "the better acquainted I became with the Jew, the more forgiving I inevitably became towards the worker" (1992, p. 58).

Hitler's self-serving attributional account also served an important social-cohesion function by uniting him with other like-minded Germans who similarly consoled themselves with hatred and blame of a depersonalized and dehumanized external enemy. Moreover, this account provided Hitler with a viable target for his displaced aggression (see Baumeister et al., 1996). Even though Hitler perceived Jews as cunning, powerful creatures who orchestrated German defeat through international influence, he also viewed them as vulnerable if only Germans realized this "simple fact" and acted on it. Consistent with Weiner's (1986) attributional theory of motivation and emotion, Hitler's account likely helped him substitute feelings of dejection that were behaviorally paralyzing with feelings of anger that motivated violent behavioral intentions against the perceived enemy.

The Jewish conspiracy account, and the reprisals it engendered, was also conducive to establishing a renewed sense of order and purpose—hallmarks of psychological well being (Antonovsky, 1982)—in Hitler's life. Indeed, it provided Hitler with no less than the basis for a messianic mission to save humanity from perdition, a mission that would go a long way toward bolstering his hubris and countering his earlier failures:

> If, with the help of his Marxist creed, the Jew is victorious over the other peoples of the world, his crown will be the funeral wreath of humanity and this planet will, as it did thousands of years ago, move through the ether devoid of men. . . Hence today I believe that I am acting in accordance with the will of the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew, I am fighting for the work of the Lord. (Hitler, 1992, p. 60)

Once again, I point out that the tendency to generate self-bolstering accounts of one's personal history is not a sign of abnormality. Indeed, the dispositional account of Jews that Hitler and others came to believe also exemplifies an attributional tendency so common it has been called the *fundamental attribution error* (Ross, 1977)—namely, the tendency to attribute the causes of events to the dispositions or traits of individuals or groups rather than to situational forces. Of course, this does not mean that everyone is equally motivated to generate causal attributions, search for information, and evaluate its significance in a biased and self-serving manner. It seems likely that Hitler's threatened egotism would have amplified these attributional tendencies. Nevertheless, the preceding analysis should indicate that Hitler's social cognition is neither incomprehensible, nor beyond the scope of what social psychology has revealed about the processes underlying human nature.

Social Influence and the Need for Cognitive Balance

Social psychologists have long realized that individuals and the groups to which they belong are in a state of constant tension. As Ross and Nisbett put it:

Individuals will have different sources of information about important topics and will construe this information in various ways. This will produce opinion deviance, which will be met with forces toward uniformity by the group. . . . In the event that it does not prove possible to move the group toward one's own view *and* the group is less than convincing on informational grounds *and* one is unwilling to reject the group, there is a powerful kind of tension recognized by many theorists of the 1950s, including Heider, Newcomb, and Festinger. (1991, pp. 45-46).

That tension stems from the individual's need to seek cognitive balance or consistency among a set of affective relations, such that if *A* likes *B*, and *B* dislikes *C*, then *A* should also dislike *C*.

In the present context, this theoretical perspective indicates that if (a) Hitler was an ardent nationalist (strong positive valence toward German nationalist movements) and (b) nationalist movements were ardently antisemitic (strong negative valence toward Jews), then (c) Hitler would also be motivated to feel negatively toward Jews in order to maintain balance or to avoid *cognitive dissonance* (Festinger, 1957)—that negative drive state resulting from an awareness of one's attitudinal and/or behavioral inconsistencies. The exception would be if Hitler also had felt a strong positive connection to Jews, in which case he might have been forced to modify his views of some nationalist movements. But that obviously was not the case. What is most likely, and what in fact coheres with Hitler's own account in *Mein Kampf*, is that he simply did not give much thought to Jews until he began to identify with the Christian Social Party, which was headed by his antisemitic role model, Karl Lueger. According to theories of cognitive consistency, it is precisely an ambivalent relation that is most easily changed in order to restore cognitive balance.

Dynamics of Attitudinal Change

The need to restore cognitive balance does not result in an immediate change in one's attitude towards a particular object. Rather, it biases the way individuals seek and interpret information about that object, such that any new "evidence" found tends to confirm the view that would restore balance. Note also that one need not be aware of the directional nature of such reasoning for it to take place. Indeed, it is far more compelling if one does not realize the biases that may have led to the adoption of particular attitudes or beliefs. This allows one to maintain the illusion of objectivity characteristic of what Ross and Ward (1996) have called *naive realism*.

According to Ross and Ward, the naive realist subscribes to three basic tenets: First, he believes that his attitudes, beliefs, preferences and perceptions follow from a relatively dispassionate, objective apprehension of reality. Second, he believes that other social perceivers will share his views provided they have access to the same information and have had adequate time to process that information. Third, he believes that divergent views are the result of ignorance, irrationality, or reasoning biased by self-interest, ideology, or some other distorting factor. For instance, while Hitler believed that his perceptions of Germany's greatness were objective truths, he viewed French nationalism as the result of socially constructed, self-serving attitudes. In *Mein Kampf*, he wrote "the fact is that the young Frenchman is not brought up to be objective, but is instilled with the most subjective conceivable view, in so far as the importance of the political or cultural greatness of his fatherland is concerned" (1992, p. 29). Hitler's naive realism resulted in an unshakable conviction in the truth of his attributions and perceptions, including the "objective" threat posed by Jews.

Hitler's naive realism also revealed itself when he described how his reason, sharpened by Lueger's arguments, had finally come to dominate his sentiments, which he claimed were initially somewhat favorable towards Jews:

My views with regard to anti-Semitism thus succumbed to the passage of time, and this was my greatest transformation of all. It cost me the greatest inner soul struggles, and only after months of battle between my reason and my sentiments did my reason begin to emerge victorious. Two years later, my sentiment had followed my reason, and from then on became its most loyal guardian and sentinel. (1992, p. 51)

To the contrary, it is quite likely that Hitler's reasoning came to follow his sentiments.

Consider a sketch of the dynamics of restoring balance in Hitler's case: Hitler identifies with German nationalism. He knows that nationalists tend to spend a lot of time talking or writing about the "Jewish question" (i.e., the Jewish *problem*). Initially, he does not perceive a "Jewish problem" and even suspects that his nationalist contemporaries are, as he put it in *Mein Kampf*, "reactionary" (p. 51). Yet, to be sure, he encounters no one who dissents from these views. Despite the apparent oddity of this obsession with Jews, Hitler still feels positive toward members of this movement and so he is willing to listen to their arguments about Jews. Mingled with praise of Germany and the German people, which makes Hitler feel good, is condemnation of Jewry. The mere frequency of the "debate" of the Jewish problem makes him wonder whether there can be no truth to the arguments, even if the validity of these arguments appears weak.

Slowly, he perceives things on his own that he had previously not seen. For instance, he observes that some articles he reads, which strike him as having anti-German sentiments, are authored by people with Jewish-sounding names. He encounters "trashy" art that he dislikes and discovers that the artist, or director, or producer, is Jewish. Perhaps this makes him think back to a recent antisemitic argument he heard about how Jews are

undermining German culture. As his encounters with nationalists continue, he becomes progressively less inclined to view their Anti-semitic arguments as reactionary. Indeed, he begins to see their point, and this serves to strengthen his bond with them. Intrigued by his new insights, Hitler starts to investigate the Jewish problem more actively. He examines those things he dislikes and searches for evidence that Jews are involved. Sure enough, he finds more and more evidence. He pays no attention, however, to the numbers of non-Jews that are also involved. Nor does he search for evidence of positive contributions of Jews to society. To him, these questions are irrelevant to his investigation since he is examining the Jewish *problem*. At any rate, the important truth has already been revealed: *the Jewish problem is real*.

To the social psychologist, the preceding (and admittedly oversimplified) sketch will be recognizable as an informal instantiation of several well-known and generalizable psychological principles: Individuals have a need to identify with groups whose members share with them similar attitudes, beliefs, or interests. This provides them with a sense of belongingness, stability, and meaning, allowing them to coordinate their personal and social identities. When group cohesiveness is high, as in Newcomb's (1943) Bennington study or in Sherif et al.'s (1961) Robber's Cave experiment—and certainly as it was in the *völkisch* movement of the late-1900s— pressures toward uniformity of thought, emotion, and action also run high.

Conformity to a group norm can occur for several reasons. An individual may conform due to a fear of rejection, a desire to manage others' impressions of oneself, or simply because the thought of doing otherwise can evoke feelings of anxiety or embarrassment, particularly when no other group member has openly done so (Asch, 1956). Conformity, however, may also reflect one's genuine personal convictions, or a genuine change in one's convictions. When group norms are internalized, they can have long-lasting effects on individuals' attitudes and beliefs (Newcomb, Koenig, Flacks, & Warwick, 1967). Particularly when people do not have objective information on which to base their attitudes, they may rely on social information as a basis for these evaluations (Sherif, 1937). The vagueness of the Jewish question, which Hitler himself noted in *Mein Kampf*, may very well have contributed to a reliance on the social information he accumulated from anti-semitic peers, role models, and writers.

The internalization of norms can also take place over time due to basic associative processes of conditioned response (Rescorla & Wagner, 1972). The antisemitic attitudes expressed in the *völkisch* circles to which Hitler gravitated would almost certainly have become associated with the positive feelings that nationalism instilled in Hitler. With time, the feelings evoked by anti-semitism might have become akin to those evoked directly by nationalism. Attitude changes resulting from social influence can also be mediated by cognitive processes that influence how social inferences are made. For instance, I have suggested that the mere frequency of the debate of the Jewish problem may have helped to persuade Hitler that the Jewish threat was real. Why else would so many of his like-minded peers and Germanic brethren take this problem so seriously? This is an example of the reiteration effect that I noted earlier (see Hertwig et al., 1997). The frequency with which a belief is expressed, however, is never sufficient proof that the belief is true.

As an individual's attitude changes in the direction of a group norm, other reasoning processes can help to reinforce and stabilize it. Previous knowledge may be reinterpreted in line with new attitudes and attitude-discrepant knowledge may be discounted. Indeed, even balanced media information may come to be seen as hostile towards one's side (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985), particularly for those who see issues in "black-or-white" terms, as Hitler did (perhaps this partly explains why Hitler was convinced that Jews were maligning Germany's reputation through their influence in the media). The search for new information is also likely to be sought and assimilated in a similarly biased manner (Lord, Lepper, & Ross, 1979). In particular, information that can be construed as supportive of one's attitudes is likely to be easily accepted, while counter-attitudinal evidence may be scrutinized so that every attempt is made to minimize its importance or view it as biased.

One only need to look as far as Hitler's own account of his "objective inquiry" to see that such processes facilitated his transition to anti-semitism. For instance, in Chapter 2 of *Mein Kampf*, Hitler described his first encounter with a Hassidic Jew. Hitler wondered whether this "apparition in a black caftan and black hair locks" (p. 52) could possibly be regarded as a German. How does he attempt to solve this social categorization problem?: "As always in such cases, I now began to try to relieve my doubts by books. For a few hellers I bought the first anti-Semitic pamphlets of my life (*sic*)" (p. 52). So, to allay his doubts that Jews might not be Germans, Hitler turned to anti-semitica! The result: "Wherever I went, I began to see Jews, and the more I saw, the more sharply they became distinguished in my eyes from the rest of humanity" (p. 52).

Hitler began to search directly for confirmatory evidence that Jews were responsible for a variety of things he detested. For instance, concerning his search for Jewish influence in the arts, he wrote in *Mein Kampf*: "I now began to examine carefully the names of all the creators of unclean products in public artistic life. Regardless of how my sentiment might resist, my reason was forced to draw its conclusions" (p. 54). His conclusion: "The fact that nine tenths of all literary filth, artistic trash, and theatrical idiocy can be set to the

account of a people, constituting hardly one hundredth of all the country's inhabitants, could simply not be tanked away; it was the plain truth" (p. 54). Hitler applied the same confirmatory search strategy (see Synder, 1981) over and over in different domains with the same basic result.

In each case Hitler asked questions in such a way that, in all probability, would have to be answered in favor of his existing views. For instance, he asked "was there any sort of filth or profligacy, particularly in cultural life, without *at least one Jew* involved in it?" (p. 53, italics mine). Of course, it should not be difficult to answer this question in the affirmative; however, that would be the case regardless of the social group that was being scrutinized. As the "objective evidence" accumulated, he was able to reorganize and reinterpret much of what he had already come to know within an anti-semitic world view: "A thousand things which I had hardly seen before now struck my notice, and others, which had previously given me food for thought, I now learned to grasp and understand" (p. 54).

Cognitive Style

Even if the social psychological processes and socially pervasive anti-semitic beliefs already noted are taken into consideration, it may still be difficult to see how Hitler could have come to firmly believe in something as outlandish as an international Jewish conspiracy. I believe the adoption of these beliefs was also facilitated by various aspects of Hitler's cognitive style. Specifically, Hitler's thinking revealed an intolerance of ambiguity and a high need for structure and "cognitive closure" (see Kruglanski, 1980) that is characteristic of authoritarians (see Suedfeld & Schaller, 2000/this volume). His lengthy description in the second chapter of *Mein Kampf* of how one should read books in order to support the scaffolding of one's established beliefs is indicative of his intolerance of inconsistency and opposing views.

Hitler was also prone to conspiratorial thinking. He firmly believed in the veracity of the

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Protocols of the Elders of Zion (Rauschning, 1939)—a conspiratorial account of Jewish world domination (Cohn, 1996). At first glance, the complexities of a conspiracy theory may seem unlikely to attract such a thinker's attention. However, conspiracy theories, complex as they may seem, actually provide causal structures that allow simple, monocausal attributions to a particular scapegoat to appear plausible. For Hitler, belief in an international Jewish enemy provided a means to find the locus of all of the numerous perceived threats to Germany and himself.

Ironically, all of the inconsistencies—the improbable twists and turns inherent in the "conspiracy"—are willingly accepted by believers because the conspiracy provides the degrees of freedom necessary for many of their deeply-held attitudes to cohere and to be consolidated in a single account that has story-like properties (e.g., see Trabasso, Secco, & van den Broek, 1984). Such causal accounts, though based on weak data, are likely to persevere once they are formed even if the initial evidence on which they are based is subsequently discredited (e.g., see Anderson, 1983; Anderson, Lepper, & Ross, 1980).

Hitler was also be prone to totalistic "all-or-nothing" thinking. Although there were endless tactical uncertainties that Hitler knowingly faced, in his long-range view everything was reducible to two unambiguous possibilities: *utopia* or *perdition*. According to his utopian vision, Germany was to be the superlative racial state, "the Germanic State of the German Nation" as Hitler described in *Mein Kampf* (p. 299). Through ruthless conquests, Germany would acquire the extensive living space (*Lebensraum*) that the "German folk community" (*Volksgemeinschaft*; see Barkai, 1994) deserved (see Hitler, 1992, chap. 4). In generations to come, the purity of German blood would be reclaimed through the fruits of "racial science" (*Rassenwissenschaft*) and the policies of "racial hygiene" (Proctor, 1988), resulting in a nation of strong, healthy Aryan men, women, and children united by a *völkisch Weltanschauung*. Should he fail, he believed, all would be lost and the Jew would be crowned with the funeral wreath of humanity. This kind of "ultimate stakes" thinking can engender an incredibly strong motivation to achieve one's goals at any price, particularly for naive realists like Hitler who, as noted before, are convinced that their observations are unbiased reflections of reality.

Once again, it is important to point out that a rigid cognitive style is not necessarily a sign of abnormality or inexplicable evil. Indeed, the "authoritarian personality" construct was developed by Adorno et al. (1950) in an attempt to explain why so many ordinary Germans allowed themselves to become perpetrators of genocide. The point is that similar cognitive processes may be just as important for explaining why some leaders are willing to pursue policies that are knowingly designed to result in the mass murder of innocent civilians.

Totalistic thinking lends itself to totalitarianism, the ideology of absolute power, and this increases the likelihood of democide. Rummel (1994; see also, Fein, 1993) has shown that, during the 20th century, seven of the eleven *megamurders* namely, "those states killing in cold blood, aside from warfare, 1,000,000 or more men,

women, and children" (p. 10) were totalitarian regimes. These regimes accounted for 90 percent of the 142,902,000 deaths caused by megamurdering states. In Hitler's case, his totalism motivated him to destroy elements of his social world, as he perceived it, that negated the possibility of his utopia. These perceived threats were organized primarily along racial lines with Jews representing the greatest menace.

Thinking, Emotion, and Action

Extreme evildoers are often portrayed as monsters devoid of any human emotion. Although this stereotype may help to preserve certain comforting assumptions about humanity, it could not be farther from the truth. A considerable amount of psychological research has shown that negative emotional reactions to personal experiences are likely to trigger attributional thinking geared toward explaining past failures and planning for future success (Schwarz, 1990; Taylor, 1991). As noted earlier, Hitler's contempt for Jews became pronounced at a time when he was experiencing several intense negative emotions following Germany's loss of the First World War (Kershaw, 1998). His attributional account of Germany's defeat provided the basic cognitive structure within which those negative feelings could be interpreted. The result was a core cluster of attitudes that Hitler would build on in the months and years that followed the war, attitudes that would fundamentally shape all of his subsequent democidal plans. In particular, Hitler's desire for a Jew-free (*Judenrein*) Europe was fuelled by a conjunction of emotional reactions that "the Jew" evoked in him. Primary among these were disgust, hatred, and fear. Each of these emotions in turn can be linked to dominant themes in anti-semitic propaganda that influenced Hitler. And each can be found replicated in Hitler's own Nazi propaganda. I touch on each briefly next.

Disgust. Evocative of disgust, Jews were portrayed as dirty animals. Analogies to rats and bacilli were common in pre-Nazi and Nazi propaganda. For instance, the Nazi "documentary" film entitled *der ewige Jude* (the eternal Jew) depicted the spread of Jews as a worldwide plague of bacillus-carrying rats (Kershaw, 1987). Hitler's personal disgust with Jews is evident in many passages of *Mein Kampf*:

By their very exterior you could tell they were no lovers of water, and, to your distress, you often knew if with your eyes closed. Later I often grew sick to my stomach from the smell of these caftan-wearers. Added to this, there was their unclean dress and their generally unheroic appearance. (1992, p. 53)

Was there any form of filth or profligacy, particularly in cultural life, without at least one Jew involved in it? If you cut even cautiously into such an abscess, you found, like a maggot in a rotting body, often dazzled by the sudden light a kike! (1992, p. 53)

As these passages illustrate, Hitler was disgusted with Jews both in physical and moral terms, and these were closely intertwined.

Hatred and revenge. Of all the groups targeted by the Nazis for democide, none was so hated by Hitler as the Jews. This had much to do with the contents of Hitler's attributional thinking toward Jews. Not only had Hitler come to view Jews as a threat to Germany (and, indeed, humanity), he had become convinced that Jews had *intentionally* sought to undermine Germany and the *Volksgemeinschaft* and, moreover, that Jews were mocking Germany in its defeat. His speech to the Reichstag on 30 January 1939 also indicates that Hitler believed that the Jews had mocked *him* personally:

During the time of my struggle for power it was in the first instance the Jewish race which only received my prophesies with laughter when I said that I would one day take over the leadership of the state, and with it that of the whole nation, and that I would then

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among other things settle the Jewish problem. Their laughter was uproarious but for some time now I think they have been laughing on the other side of their face. Today I will once more be a prophet: If the international Jewish financiers in and outside Europe should succeed once more in plunging the nations into a world war, then the result will not be the Bolshevization of the earth, and thus the victory of Jewry, but the annihilation of the Jewish race in Europe. (trans. in Berenbaum, 1997, p. 161).

Jewish annihilation, therefore, was to represent more than a solution to a powerful threat, it was to be the ultimate form of *retribution* for "the diabolical craftiness of these seducers" (Hitler, 1992, p. 58) who had stabbed Germany in the back and who thought that they had gotten away with it without harm. Hitler took great pleasure in overseeing the systematic destruction of European Jewry, in exercising fate control over his mortal enemy, and in having the last laugh.

Fear and threat. The perception of threat, and its accompanying emotion of fear, was central to most of the democidal operations that Hitler instigated. The extermination of Jews, Sinti and Roma (Kenrick & Puxton, 1972), and the "hereditarily ill" (Friedlander, 1995) all have in common a focus on minimizing further prevention failures (see Higgins, 1987), and all followed from Hitler's belief that history was a long, racial struggle (*Volkstumskampf*). The racial desecration (*Blutschande*) of the German nation that had taken place over centuries had to somehow be undone, for if not, it would eventually succumb to an irreversible effect of genetic entropy. Without an urgent response—a thorough cleansing of the Aryan gene pool—the Aryan race would inevitably witness its final undoing. Hence, on 23 November 1939, Hitler informed his military leaders: "a racial war has broken out and this war shall determine who shall govern Europe and with it, the world" (quoted in Förster, 1994, p. 87).

The threat posed by "the Jew" was the most serious to Hitler. Jews, he perceived, were powerful, numerous, widely distributed throughout the world and highly organized, seductive, and the physical incarnation of pure evil. To Hitler, Jews were at the heart of the socio -political forms that he passionately opposed. Jews, he believed, were the originators of Marxist communism, capitalism, and parliamentary democracy. But, to Hitler, these were mere socio-political smokescreens that the Jew had created to cover up their plans for world domination: "only in this way is it possible for the real wirepuller to remain carefully in the background and never be called to responsibility" (Hitler, 1992, p. 83). Thus, the Jew was the primary enemy that Hitler perceived Germany to face. It was hence that, at the close of his political life and just before his suicide in Berlin, Hitler ended his political testament dated 29 April 1945 with the following paragraph: "Above all, I enjoin the government and the people to uphold the race laws to the limit and to resist mercilessly the poisoner of all nations, international Jewry" (trans. in Berenbaum, 1997, p. 165). The war against the Jews, as Dawidowicz (1986) correctly labeled it, remained Hitler's highest priority right to the end of his life.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have indicated the need to develop a psychology of the *instigator* of collective violence. I have also tried to show that our understanding of Hitler and of the evil that Hitler represents might be increased by examining him through the lens of social psychology. I have proceeded from the assumption that an examination of Hitler's thinking, emotions, motivations, and behaviors might reveal tendencies similar to those observed in ordinary individuals. The initial observations noted in this chapter suggest that some of those psychological tendencies were not absent but perhaps *exaggerated* in Hitler a hypothesis that might be profitably pursued in future archival research. A next step might also be to compare the social-cognitive tendencies of different instigators of collective violence, examining as well the background socio-political conditions under which they rose to power.

In closing, it is important to note that my attempt to "normalize Hitler" by examining his behavior from a subjectivist and situationist perspective does not imply, as some might wrongly assume, that there is a Hitler in all of us. However, I hope that this chapter may convince the reader that social psychological accounts of evil do not necessitate a view of people as fundamentally good either. Lay dispositionist accounts of evil may erroneously portray evildoers as monsters, but situationist accounts may also erroneously portray evildoers as good-intentioned souls who are swept along by the power of bad situations. In particular, the banality perspective on evil, which tends to portray evildoers as merely dutiful bureaucrats (e.g., see Milgram, 1974; Zimbardo, 1995), needs dramatic revision because it presently offers an oversimplified situationist account that is especially likely to be misconstrued as exculpatory (Mandel, 1998). In this chapter, I have tried to show that there is a darker side to human nature that is nevertheless consistent with much of what social psychological research has revealed.

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